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————— NOTES ON NO-PLATFORMING

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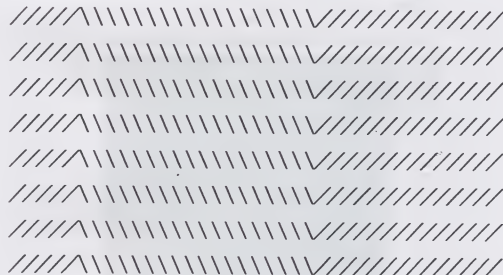
————— as compiled by Sarah Brouillette

~~FREE SPEECH~~



"WE REJECT THE VIEW THAT THE RESTRICTION OF FASCIST ORGANISATIONS IN THIS WAY IS TO DENY ALL FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION; OUR AIM IS TO MAKE THE IDEAL OF FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND EXPRESSION MEANINGFUL IN REALITY. TO TURN THE PROBLEM OF 'FREE SPEECH' FROM A PRACTICAL INTO AN ABSTRACT QUESTION IS TO ... ALLOW FASCISTS AND RACISTS TO SHELTER UNDER THE DEMOCRATIC FREEDOMS WHEN THEIR ULTIMATE AIM IS TO DESTROY SUCH FREEDOMS."

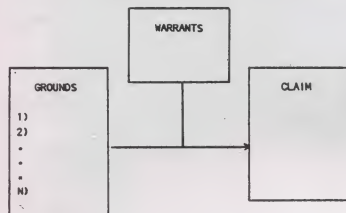
■ *from the* NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS' (UK)
NO-PLATFORM POLICY



Basic Argument Patterns

Here we will comment on the most commonly encountered argument structures.

Figure 1.



In Figure 1 we see the most basic pattern of argument structure. The claim is supported by the given grounds in accordance with the appropriate warrants.

WHEN YOU DEFEND FREE AND OPEN SPEECH regardless of its consequences, you aren't defending a neutral philosophy or abstract principle; you are defending fascists, and they aren't helpless and voiceless and in need of your defense.

We are nowhere obliged to let fascist speech occur without any resistance; quite the contrary. If some member of the university community sees fit to invite a fascist or fascist sympathizer to campus, we have to do and support what is needed now; and what is needed now is strenuous defense of every effort to curtail and prevent fascist speech from occurring.

Because alt-right fascist, racist, misogynist, queer and trans bashing speakers are calling for things that are already actually happening all over: racist police brutality and murders, deportations of "illegals," removal of programs that even minimally protect poor people from total destitution, security-state immigration bans and securitized borders, attacks against Muslims and mosques, attacks against queer and trans people and the organizations that exist to support them.



The agenda fascists speak in support of may not be hate speech according to the criminal code. But it can only be imposed by means of brutality, and its implications are thoroughly, intentionally, wilfully violent. Their views engender and support violence. That's why it's never just a question of free speech. Words have power when speakers have access to what is materially necessary to amplify one's views: a platform, a microform, a video recorder, etc. Alt-right speakers know that they have the power to mobilize people to attack, brutalize, harass, kill – they themselves attack and harass. When they say, *but but* "words aren't actions," they know exactly what sort of a crude, whiney half-truth that is.

So no, "we" do not have to permit any kind of speech. But the debate prompt raises the question: who is we, anyway? The campus is not a unified entity, a singular "we." If a group wants to bring to campus someone with dangerous, toxic views about women or racialized minorities or immigrants or the good reasons to raise the price of medicines, these are views that pose a direct threat to people here tonight. I do not have to "allow" this speech. What is it to "allow"? to step back and accept the proceedings? To criticize students who come forward in protest? NO WAY.

Let me say it again. Anti-immigrant sentiment, rounding up "illegals," Trump's travel bans, transphobia, Islamophobia, police brutality and murders of black people and the supposedly mentally unsound and more. I'm scratching the surface. The people whose speech is now associated with the phrase "free speech" – because these people are bemoaning having their speech blocked, and because the fact that their speeches are getting blocked is what has renewed interest in the free-speech debate – these are the very people who are doing whatever they can to legitimize and sanitize these acts of everyday violence. They are mobilizing other people to support this violence.

Their free-speech defense is a fake. It is a ruse to hide the truth of these hate-filled and power-hungry people trying to curtail radically others' ability to flourish – flourish, well, I

mean even survive. They are using this dogmatic adherence to the legally sanctioned sanctity of individual rights in order to try to build power, and to challenge and threaten the higher-order right of communities – and here we are talking about relatively poor, minoritized, non-hegemonic communities – to defend themselves from those who pose a direct threat to them.

People who support total free speech in all contexts regardless of consequences argue that adherence to the principle of free speech is right in and of itself. That it isn't about a means to an end. They say free speech is its own ends, its own self-validating principle.

But if you push on this for even a minute you realize that, first, the people who are now trumpeting their free speech will be the first people to abandon any kind of adherence to formal rights to protect anyone who disagrees with them in a time of real conflict.

Ultra-right, radical right, alt-right fascist speakers have been shown to abandon the whole idea of rights as soon as they have enough actual power to do so. So there is an ends in this means-ends equation, and the end is "power," not "free speech" as some sort of abstract principle. The speaker always has a goal; speech is never just speculative musing. Its purposeful, goal-filled, loaded with desires for outcomes.

Therefore, speech rights are always a means to something, not an end in and of themselves! If we acknowledge this, I mean if we admit that free speech cannot be its own ends, we realize it is a matter of incompatible ends. Which means it

If you object to the presence of a certain form of speech, that doesn't make speech disappear. The objection draws attention to the counter-argument. It draws attention to the fact that it is contested speech. If you ignore it, you are just complicit.

is a matter of struggle. I don't disagree with the sheer fact that Milo is speaking; I find what he is saying hateful and dangerous and I want to deny him the capacity to keep saying it!

I don't need to agree that my political enemies have the right to a platform because of some abstract adherence to the principle of free speech as an end in itself. I've just argued that there is no such thing! Speech is always a tool toward some end; in advancing toward my own ends, my own vision of what is right and good, I can use speech, but I can also use preventing someone else's speech.

People say "debate them rationally and their noxious views will be defeated!"

This argument makes the massive mistake of thinking that fascist views are rationally arrived at somehow. People hold fascist views for all sorts of reasons that have nothing to do with reasoned debate. Often, they just want to have power over other people and are full of cowardice and hatred. Often their views are amplified because

they represent the extreme form of something generally accepted and domesticated. Milo and his ilk are useful to the average political conservative because he makes their views look tame, and he is thereby able to advance and spread what are often the actual views of the more apparently

moderate conservative through this means! Let's not help him along.

They get airtime and amplification not because they are persuasive but because of power and politics and the organization of our societies at the present moment. These people are not being censored; we don't have that power. The power we have is to tell them they aren't welcome where we are.

They cannot do any advancing and building of their hate-filled agendas here. Should "we" allow all forms of speech? Again, who is we? I think that communities within that "we" will decide for themselves and we can join those communities and support their struggles or we cannot.



*There are no grounds for
defending free speech as an
abstract principle - speech
is always a means to an end.*

*And once you acknowledge
that what we're dealing with
are competing means to
competing ends (we have
different ideas about what a
good world is and how to get
there), then we're in the
realm of power and politics.*

*We're not in the realm of
philosophical abstractions
like free speech.*



How does your position enhance the academic experiences of students?

My position "enhances the academic experience of students" because it supports them in their own efforts to fight being belittled, threatened and harassed by fascist speakers! They don't need to be asked to listen while they are told that they or people they love are substandard or superfluous or threatening or evil. It's a profound insult to students to make them listen to hateful bigoted speech because of an idealized philosophical tradition of "free speech" - a tradition that has only existed for a short time, by the way, as our students learning the history of liberalism well know!

They realize or LIVE all the time I suspect the dramatic disconnect between "free speech" and "unfree world." Like, where has our vaunted adherence to the principle of free speech gotten us?

People say "just ignore these people if you don't like what they are saying." But again, I argue it's complicity to ignore it and hope it goes away, and there are victims of our silence, including students on campus. It further victimizes rape victims, for example, to not object to Milo Yiannopoulos

Figure 2.

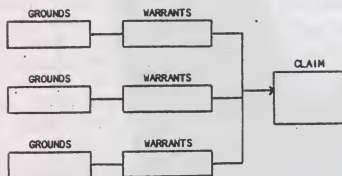


Figure 2 is a special case of Figure 1, where each warrant applies to a particular set of grounds, rather than to all the grounds in general.

having a platform from which he can say things like "men are predatory by nature." He can say that with no criminal-code punishment because he didn't actually say "go rape women," right? But his ideas legitimize rape culture, no doubt about it.

That's why I don't want the official legal definition of hate speech guiding my actions here. Who gets to decide what leads from "just talk" to "real violence"?

Milo himself insists on the distinction - he says "there is a difference between words and action." Needless to say anything he says is suspect. But I am deeply wary also of letting the government / police / legal system and/or university administration for that matter decide when a threat has been posed by what someone says.

And I would argue against positioning the university as a special sort of safe space in which we are called upon paternalistically to protect people from others' noxious views. Again, this is insulting to students. My take actually is that we never in any context - private event, street corner, political rally, classroom - need to accept the idea that someone has a right to air fascist ideology.

Our first priority should be the academic and intellectual freedom of students to themselves object to speech they find abhorrent. Notice also that I am not putting a priority on the university making the decision about "forbidding" a speaker from coming. Sure, maybe someone in an office somewhere at a university would have the power to do that and would agree that the speech isn't supportable in principle. Or someone maybe out of fear of a riot or of someone getting hurt in an action would cancel an event. This happens. It happens often in response to people stepping forward to say they will protest a speaker's presence on campus.

But what I would push for first and foremost is not the university acting as censor. What I would push for rather is recognition that if a student objects to what a fascist speaker is saying they should be fully supported in trying to block that person from appearing and getting a platform.



(X)

How is your position better suited to combat harmful and hateful ideas on campus?

My position is better suited to combat harmful and hateful ideas because my position understands from the beginning that these ideas are harmful and hateful. The free-speech bros who support the abstract ideal of free speech don't even admit that ideas can cause harm.

People will often say you're just drawing attention to them by objecting to them - I call this the "amplification thesis." These people are already being heard.

Shutting a speaker down doesn't mean that speech of any kind evaporates, that no discussion happens, that noxious views are never disputed! It just means that the conversation that takes place, among students and their families and the community at large, in the press and in the pub, begins from the acknowledgement that fascist speakers are threatening to people, that people object to what they are saying, that we don't all accept these views being sanitized and given the patina of respectability that a university platform provides. Shutting a speaker down simply presents the hateful ideas as harmful. They are harmful.

Consider the recent case at Middlebury College in the US. Students showed up to stop the author of *The Bell Curve* [a book of racist pseudo-science claiming black people are naturally less intelligent] from talking. What the students did worked. This was students saying "we don't need to be directly insulted, racialized, brutalized on our campus." Putting their bodies in the way of someone saying what that guy says is to me a justified, valid, valuable form of expression.

Why is "free speech" prioritized over that form of expression?

Many people came forward, though, to publish think pieces about how he should have been allowed to talk. Don't stifle him! Debate him rationally! In those think pieces we see how



the distinction between speech and action is itself part of the whole ruse, part of how they pretend there is a polite public sphere where we can say whatever we want so long as it is "just speech." They will pose this against a sphere where scary violent radicals fight things out. This is clearly a way of keeping radical thought and action as the other to the realm of public discourse and respectability / civility, thereby silencing dissent and letting us think that isn't itself a kind of violence.

There isn't actually a reasoned debate-centered rational public sphere. This was always a myth - and everyone said this about Habermas's idea of the rational public sphere when he wrote about it. Access to the sphere of reasoned debate is always mitigated by gender, race, sexuality, and class, then we know whose voices will be dominant.

People have used the mythic ideal of equal access for every reasoned voice to prop up their domination. Only some people are in a position to say which form of expression gets called "reasonable" and whose gets called "uncivil."

Why is it that the people who claim their free speech rights are being denied are mainly from the dominant white elite who precisely do have access to media and get to share their views widely? Indeed, they have the US presidency. The ridiculous spectacle of people whose views coincide with the US president's claiming their right to speak is threatened!

We have already heard these people - too often! These people already have power and substantial freedoms and they speak against the relatively powerless. They are people

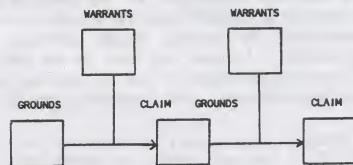
*If someone wants to give
a talk on campus that
denies events of
documented historical
oppression - NO! It just
sanitizes and
domesticates and
legitimizes their bullshit
ideas. People like that
don't need to be given
any further platform.*

in positions of influence, with media sway, often wealthy white men with media contracts and contacts. They clearly get to inform "the public discourse" powerfully. If their ideas are associated with civil discourse, rational debate, the university as a space for debate, this is domesticating those ideas, sanitizing them, making them more respectable.

It is my position which acknowledges the wisdom of students all over the world who insist on their academic right to "no-platform" these people ("no-platform" is such a great verb!) - only my position even highlights how harmful, hateful, brutalizing and dangerous fascist speech is.



Figure 3-



Here we see another form common to complex arguments. What is unique to Figure 3 is that the initial claim serves as a grounds for the final claim. So the author here has the ultimate intention of asserting the final claim, but to do this he must first show the validity of the first claim. It should be noted that claims may serve as warrants to other claims as well.

If someone's views are fascistic I have no responsibility to step back and let them speak because..."freedom." What I need to do is use whatever means necessary to participate in the conscious creation of the conditions of real material freedom for everyone. I will say it again: what alt-right speakers say represents a real threat, palpable, to many people, to young black men, to single mothers, to trans people, to people trying to survive by migrating, to anyone who doesn't subscribe to traditional ideas about naturalized gender roles, etc. We have to resist this threat; we have to show these people they can't say whatever they want without a fight.

This is for me synonymous with combating harmful and hateful ideas on campus. It is the combating, the combat. Pontificating about the value of adherence to the abstract ideal of free speech is precisely the opposite: complacency, non-combat, complicity.

Ultimately, free speech is a dangerous abstraction. Like "the free market," it has been used to justify bombing campaigns, because "they hate our freedoms," or "we need to liberate these people because they don't have the freedoms we have". I mean, freedoms? In fascist, racist ideology actual substantive freedom - I mean the right to live where you want without fear and to expect to not be deported or killed by the police at any moment - this freedom is readily denied



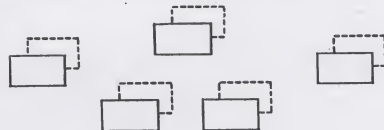
to people depicted as threatening to one's own individual right to personal security.

Alt-right speakers do not care at all about actual freedom from oppression. They care about their own power to spout noxious support for violent harm against women and racialized others and immigrants and Muslims, against non-white, non-male, non-hegemonic persons. Make no mistake: they will not uphold your rights in the abstract if it serves their purposes to deny them. They are truncating and denying rights left and right. They are appealing to free speech rights these days because it serves them for a moment; as I said before, it is a means to an end.

We can only debate what ends we have and what tools work best for getting there. There is nothing else; the rest - like total adherence to the abstract principle of free speech - is at best a profound distraction, and at worst a form of complicity in the domestication of ultra-right fascism.



It may be useful to pose a shadow argument as "lying behind" or shaping the case in this and other selections. We have sometimes drawn these "shadow" arguments in with a dotted outline behind the diagram of the five topics of reasoning as shown below.



Sarah Brouillette is an English professor based in Ottawa. Her research develops anti-capitalist approaches to art and culture.

These notes are transcribed from a debate that took place at Carleton University. They borrow from conversations with John Pat Leary, David Thomas, and Joshua Clover.

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2019